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Letter to the Editor

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Letter to the Editor

To the Editor:

By chance, I have just seen a copy of the August, 1998 issue of *The Linacre Quarterly*. Its appearance (courtesy of my partner) stirred some long-forgotten memories as I recalled seeing it often on my father's desk. He practiced internal medicine in Brooklyn for more than 50 years and was a prominent member of the local chapter of the Catholic Physicians' Guild.

I was struck by the discussion of a hospital ethics case in that issue by Father Joseph Howard. He described the tragic case of a young woman in a persistent vegetative state following an auto accident. Her posterior pituitary had been damaged and she remained dependent on DDAVP for maintenance of hydration. She had adequate respiratory drive but was nourished via a feeding tube. Fr. Howard's argument for continuance of these services was grounded in the Aristotelian notion of a soul's having rational, sensitive, and vegetative functions. Since she had vegetative functions, he concluded that her soul was present and, therefore, the DDAVP (and the feeding tube) should be maintained.

I would disagree and argue that the Aristotelian and religious concepts of the soul are different. The religious concept would only include those higher cortical functions that mark us as uniquely human. This young woman had long lost them.

Admittedly, the calculations are complex but I would argue that the DDAVP (and the feeding tube) are extra-ordinary measures that only prolong the dying process for this woman. For her, the provision is morally optional at most and I would argue strongly for their withdrawal.

These decisions are surely difficult. I have served on our hospital's ethics committee for a number of years and even chaired it for a term. Such a decision is never easy or taken lightly.

**- A. Sidney Barritt III,
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